

[The Arizona Republic](#)

E.J. Montini

I've had an affinity for Don Quixote-like quests ever since grade school, when the Sisters of St. Joseph (following years of unanswered prayers and sharp discipline) declared me to be a lost cause. So naturally I contacted Rep. Harry Mitchell, D-Ariz., when I found out that he was trying - again - to block the automatic pay raise that members of Congress give themselves.

The automatic raise was passed into law back in 1989. Members of Congress either grew weary of trying to convince constituents that they deserved a salary increase, or they recognized that such a thing was not possible. Or both.

"It's not right," Mitchell told me. The former mayor of Tempe entered Congress in 2006 at the age of 66, having spent most of his adult life as a teacher. He had to face political constituents each day as a city leader and state legislator.

Early on in his time in Washington, Mitchell decided to introduce a bill to block the raise. It failed. He has teamed up in the effort with Rep. Ron Paul, R-Texas.

"There were 34 co-sponsors last year and 29 before that," Mitchell said. "This year it's been a lot better. More and more are joining us. With unemployment going up, people losing their retirement, their jobs, their income, their houses, I can't imagine Congress taking a \$4,700 pay raise for themselves."

Really? I can.

I'd guess that Mitchell (who donates his raise to charity) can imagine it as well, just as I'd guess that pushing this idea doesn't make him many friends among his colleagues.

According to Mitchell's office, his bill now has more than 60 sponsors; among them are only two other members of the Arizona delegation: Rep. Gabrielle Giffords and Rep. Ann Kirkpatrick.

Opponents of the proposal would argue that Mitchell's legislation is an ineffective and largely symbolic measure, since it would save taxpayers only \$2.5 million at a time when the national deficit is set to rise well over \$1 trillion.

The politicians and Washington pundits who make such an argument do not understand that to regular folks like us there is no such thing as ONLY \$2.5 million. To us, \$2.5 million is a lot of money. A lot of jobs. A lot of schoolbooks and medicine and mortgage payments and so on.

"And we shouldn't discount the symbolism," Mitchell said. "We've been telling these corporate types who are asking for bailouts not to take bonuses, but then we're going to take ours?"

"My base salary when I came here was \$165,000. If you tell most Americans that you need a raise because you're only making \$165,000, that's not going to sell."

Mitchell says that he sometimes longs for his days as Tempe mayor.

"When I was teaching school and being mayor I saw the people I represented every day," he told me. "That was a great thing. I'd see 150 kids in classes every day and a lot of the questions they asked me came from their parents. And that was just the way it should have been.

"Even now when I come home I like to go to a public place, like Costco, where I'll see a lot of people. It takes me forever to get through Costco. A guy came up to me there recently, when Congress was discussing the bailouts, and all he said to me was, 'Don't give the (expletives) anything.' That seemed to satisfy him."

And why not? A constituent got to speak directly to a congressman. It's enough to make a person believe in miracles.

Salary hike in Congress irks Mitchell

Thursday, 08 January 2009

In Washington there are plenty of windmills for a politician to tilt at. The congressional pay raise isn't close to being the biggest one. But Rep. Don Quixote has it in his sights.

He's making a run at it. He has a chance.